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THE SPACE BETWEEN

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
For The Degree of Fine Arts
In the Department of Art
The University of Mississippi

by

AARON J. MCELFISH

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ABSTRACT

This series of abstracted landscapes is a visual representation of a challenge to step outside of my comfort zone. The paintings are an expression of emotions never before presented in the artist's work. The series expresses the visceral sensation of isolation, anger, and solace experienced throughout the creation of the work. The abstracted landscapes are an expression of the journey from anger and frustration to a path towards understanding and enlightenment.

In the early stages, there were no tangible plans, just painting on tar-paper. The work then evolved to black and white latex paints built up over joint compound and painted on a tar-paper support. A knife was used to create the scratch marks and textural elements found throughout the series. Compositions were built up and destroyed until what the viewers sees before them was produced. Every piece was based on action and reaction relying on pure artistic instinct. The work naturally evolved. The titles for the paintings come from memories of places, or sensations that reoccur throughout the artist's life. Stylistic and aesthetic inspiration references the world of Abstract Expressionism and German Expressionism.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this to all those who inspire and follow their dreams, to those who stand up and choose to take the road less traveled, as well as to those who see the world in their own way.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A great debt of gratitude exists to all those who helped throughout this great undertaking. My utmost appreciation goes out to the faculty and staff of The University of Mississippi Department of Art, the Meridian Museum of Art, as well as appreciation to my family and friends, especially to that girl across the sea. I would not have made it this far without the patience and support of all of you. Thank you.

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I: CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Abstract work just never seemed real. As a style, Expressionist work seemed a completely foreign concept until this series began; however, as the project evolved, so did interest in the work. Stylistic influence can be found within the world of Abstract Expressionism. The work was first approached with disdain, a subdued hostility, and with thoughts of abject absurdity. Working like this can be a frightening experience.

Abstract Expressionism as an artistic movement was the first movement with joint European and American roots; it is less a movement than it is an attitude. The paramount concern to the Abstract Expressionist was a fierce attachment to psychic self-expression very similar to existentialist thought (Atkins 36-37). Expressing pure emotion in art can be frightening. This series helped in overcoming a sense of hubris brought on by being fearful of making “bad art.”

This series began with a feeling of a total loss of control and an abandonment of all the studio principles and instincts ever learned. It was necessary to overcome this in order to let go enough mentally to just let the materials and emotions “become.” In a way, the process of making the work encouraged embracing this intangible world of emotions. This series of work was a challenge meant to break creative boundaries.

Frustration and anger fueled the mark making throughout the early stages of the project. There was an inherent violence in this mark making process; aside from brushing on paint, a

knife was utilized to stab and scrape away at the work, sometimes spelling out obscenities.

Angry words littered the surface of every piece in the series adding to the multitude of layers that made up the paintings. The lesson learned from this process was that of creation through destruction and rebirth. Every painting had undergone multiple incarnations. In many ways the project was also an exercise in patience and faith in the ability to produce work. There was no road map throughout the project and not knowing what the final images were going to look like was a notion that had to be overcome. The frustration and anger is found throughout all the paintings and serves to unify the series.

Primary tools used were black and white gallon buckets of acrylic and cheap paintbrushes. The primary brush was a four-inch house painting brush crudely taped to a yardstick. Also used were a hand broom, a push broom, and an old straw broom; all were used to make unique marks. The paint and brushes alone did not create the layers needed for the effects. Household joint compound, the kind used for drywall and to fill in holes, was employed to build up texture on the flat surface of the roofing paper. A faux weathering and decay began to appear on the paper, very similar to the style of marks made by such artists as Antoni Tàpies and Robert Rauschenberg. They made the kind of marks found on old desks, on the walls of old abandoned houses, the sides of buildings suffering old age and neglect, even marks found after explosions. These were oddly beautiful despite the connotation of the marks. Aside from the traditional tools, other marks were made with knives to scrape away at the surface, creating a push and pull of layers. The physical act of creating was encompassing, and every mark was made with great intent. There was no thinking about placement of lines, only action and reaction. A game of balance and flow was played as the latex paint and joint compound were layered on the surface of the work. There was building in non-specific areas and destruction in others. It was a technique learned

from the paintings of Antoni Tapies. Aesthetics researched for inspiration include such artists as Antoni Tapies, Robert Sperry, Hans Brosch, Frans Kline, Donald Sultan, Anselm Kiefer, Robert Wilson and Fritz Lang.

Antoni Tapies' abstract paintings employ a process of building on the canvas followed by scraping away. Tapies' textures, found on buildings and structures in city streets, are juxtaposed with images of Tapies' mixed media paintings. Antoni Tapies' work is representative of *Arte Povera*, a style and movement in art originating in Italy in the 1960s, combining aspects of conceptual, minimalist, and performance art. It made use of worthless or common materials such as stones or newspapers, in the hope of subverting the commercialization of art. The translation of *Arte Povera* translates as "impoverished art." His work appeared grounded in the brute reality of the Spanish street. Joan Brossa wrote about what Tapies expressed:

In Tapies' work, objective reality is revealed to us by means of images drawn from deeply felt experiences, continually reinvented and reconstructed. Each of his big canvases is full of a feeling of humanity and powerful suggestiveness. Both emanate from the diversity of connotations that his symbols imply and from the strange ambiguity of the everyday objects that he often depicts. The materials that compose the surfaces seem to be profoundly humanized, metalized as it were, by the presence of man and his actions. An entire dialectics of praxis has resulted from these complex relationships and interpenetrations between man and matter. The emotive quality of objects affected by life, the drama of matter imbued with the traces of man, lead to a consideration of Tapies' work as a permanent reflection on the human condition (Brossa 17).

Joan Brossa described Antoni Tàpies' work as urban images and deeply felt landscapes contemplated by the artist himself, where he lives and where all the objects he has collected can be found; what he cherishes and loves (Brossa 17-19).

The influence of Antoni Tàpies' work affected the way that the series progressed. Textured masses formed, dominating the layers of sporadic paint and joint compound. The nature of the paintings changed, as marks and masses had to be more intentional regarding line, unity, balance, scale, proportion, rhythm, illusion of space and texture. The final layers pulled the chaotic elements together, bringing to the paintings a sense of balance and structure, harnessing the violent mark making. The strong vertical and horizontal masses began to create a juxtaposition of elements in the work.

Another influence was German Expressionist painter and stage designer Hans Brosch. He provided a model for compositional elements in the way his work expressed decomposition through structure and form. The mood in Brosch's paintings evokes the end of time: brittle beams behind crumbling walls amid dampness and fog. Brosch's lines are known for their spontaneous gestural yet dominating quality, as well as his use of high contrast and limited color palette (Gemar-Koeltzsch 98-99).

Robert Sperry, a ceramicist, painter and filmmaker, also influenced textural elements within this particular series. Similar to the work of Franz Kline, Sperry's nonrepresentational slabs produced between the years 1977-1983 reference decay, which is specifically a metaphor for the threat of nuclear destruction during the Cold War. Sperry utilizes explosive spatters, marks of flux, and dynamic movement with circular flaring shapes. Sperry stuck to strict parameters to make a series with no color, or any resemblance to the work of his previous representational works, but rather to make a series of slab plates utilizing varying degrees of

contrast (Kangas 45). Sperry's slabs are referenced in the same manner as the layers of Antoni Tapies. They are similar to the building and scraping of the layers of joint compound in the paintings within the series. Research into Robert Sperry helped to manifest a sense of controlled decomposition throughout the work, specifically in marks that looked as though they were ready to crumble off the surface of the paintings despite being permanent this added a sculptural element to the paintings. An example of such marks can be found throughout the painting *Horizons*. A crackling effect in the upper left corner creates a sense that the painting will crumble despite measures taken to protect the work.

Franz Kline was studied specifically for his gestural marks and brush strokes. Kline's paintings influenced the work in both mark making and scale. His work is a deceptive mix of black and white simplicity and wild abandonment, yet every mark had a purpose. Franz Kline's mastery of masses and contrast was considered for structure and form throughout the series. Kline's use of broad gestural lines forces the viewer to consider both the positive and negative shapes formed by his use of high contrast. A sporadic quality, an almost controlled chaos is found within Kline's work. Kline enjoyed working on a monumental scale, which allowed for improvisation despite the fact that he worked in a controlled manner utilizing projections (Kline, Franz, and Albert Boime 17).

German painter Anselm Kiefer's paintings of dark landscapes helped to encourage mood as well as application of materials, specifically Kiefer's thick layering of impasto painting techniques. Kiefer worked in a multitude of mediums including lead, dried flowers, straw, and broken glass (Alteveer, Ian).

Another artist whose work was instructional was Donald Sultan. His paintings of dark brooding landscapes that seemed to only exist in the surreal incited the visceral feelings sought

for the series. Sultan's landscapes convey feelings of desolation. The landscapes are of industrial settings, gritty, and low contrast. Sultan's contrast and values were considered for the paintings.

Robert Wilson's stagecraft affected elements within the series. Wilson is known for his high contrast surreal theater backdrops, usage of extreme scale, and for having a brutal simplistic style. His untitled works on paper inspired the lighting within in the paintings. His thumbnail sketches alone express a visual power in simple black and white that few artists can achieve with a rainbow of colors. Wilson's ability to use a few simple masses of light and dark was something to strive for. Wilson's use of lighting throughout his work leads the audience to focus only on the essential elements within the composition. This aspect of Wilson's work was of utmost importance throughout the creation of this body of work. This is exemplified within the painting *Monoliths* in the form of simplified masses.

The final influence on the work was that of German expressionist filmmaker and director Fritz Lang. Lang's command of composition and harsh lighting helped to solidify the mood of the series during the making of this work. Fritz Lang's best-known films are *Metropolis* and *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari*. He is known for his manipulation of lights, shadows, and set designs that can only be described as asymmetrical, disorienting and surreal. The films of this time captured all the angst and emotions expressed from a nation ravaged by war (Kolar). In Germany there existed a predisposition towards the obscure and the undetermined, towards a brooding speculative reflection called *Grubelei*, which culminated in the apocalyptic doctrine of Expressionism (Eisner 9). This concept reflects the emotional overtones that the work conveys.

In *Expressionismus und Film*, Rudolf Kurtz points out, "that these curves and slanting lines have a meaning, which is decidedly metaphysical. For the psychic reaction caused in the spectator by oblique lines is entirely different from that caused by straight lines" (Eisner 24).

This invoked the realization that this body of work needed to embrace some different style than was currently being used. Similarly, unexpected curves and sudden ups and downs provoke emotions quite different from those induced by harmonious and gentle gradients. This was exemplified in Fritz Lang's *Cabinet of Doctor Caligari*. The expressionists are solely concerned with images in the mind, hence oblique walls, which have no reality (Eisner 24). The paintings in this series do not have representational qualities as the town setting in Lang's work did, but the attitude expressed through the curves, and edges were considered throughout every composition. It is through the unreality of abstraction and masses that seemingly everyday landscapes turn into a more visceral and emotional setting where a shadow can cast meaning.

II: DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

The paintings in this series are the incarnation of a challenge brought on by those who wanted the artist to step out of his comfort zone. They are paintings expressing marks and emotions in a way that have never before been expressed in the artist's prior works. This series make reference to the style representative of the German and Abstract Expressionists of the twentieth century. The work is approached in the same way that Jackson Pollock produced some of his paintings: all at once. There was no chronological order to the production, or a narrative in the way that they were to be viewed. Throughout the layering of elements in every painting, an effort was made to let glimpses and shapes of the tar-paper's natural coloring show through.

In the early stages of development, there was no specific intention in mind for compositional elements or any specific meaning aside from the expression of emotions through marks. There was rawness throughout the surface of the work. It was through this layering and under painting that depth and meaning began to develop throughout the series. There was an idea of creating visual interest in the spaces where there were no marks and minimal textures. Toward the end of the production process, the marks changed in spirit, and more control was given to the way they were laid on the surface of the paintings. Marks transformed from angry scratches and linear elements to that of smooth and chunky masses. Lights, darks and consideration to tonal shifts grew more apparent throughout every piece. Contrast became the important element that drew each piece together.

The final result is a collection of thirteen paintings. There exists a push and pull of masked emotion within the series. The titles of these landscapes reference moments from life, as well as reoccurring emotions. Plainly spoken, the series is controlled chaos with an undercurrent of suppressed anger veiled behind the abstracted landscapes; and was about the journey to understand these emotions. It is through these abstracted landscapes that solace from that anger was found because the paintings became an outlet to present the emotions.

At the heart of the series is a world represented by light and dark shadows, not in a negative connotation, but as something sought and sometimes embraced. Physical distance is implied through use of compositions that convey isolation. There are times in our lives where our environment can shape our confidence. Consideration is given through out the series to reference places where confidence and moments of weakness are expressed. The use of contrast and the limited palette enhance dramatic lighting elements throughout the series. Every intention is made for the viewer to pick up on these visceral elements. The search is ongoing to find a place where balance between chaos and clarity exists. In the case of this series it is a land of light and shadows. Within these lights and shadows exist layers of complexity. A life has changed dramatically from this project born from a challenge. Every mark has a meaning whether it is obvious or not.

III: PLATES

PLATE 1



Rubicon

Roofing felt #30, black and white latex paint, joint compound

(70x46½ inches)

PLATE 2



Northwest Passage

Roofing felt #30, black and white latex paint, red acrylic, joint compound

(70½ x 60 inches)

PLATE 3



Trail Blazing

Roofing felt #30, black and white latex paint, joint compound

(104 x 51 inches)

PLATE 4



The Gloaming

Roofing felt #30, black and white latex paint, joint compound

(91 x 70 inches)

PLATE 5



Horizons

Roofing felt #30, black and white latex paint, joint compound

(79 x 79)

PLATE 6



Badlands

Roofing felt #30, black and white latex paint, joint compound

(95 x 69½ inches)

PLATE 7



Broken Trail

Roofing felt #30, black and white latex paint, joint compound

(104 x 67 inches)

PLATE 8



Desolation

Roofing felt #30, black and white latex paint, joint compound

(104 x 71 inches)

PLATE 9



Monoliths

Roofing felt #30, black and white latex paint, joint compound

(104 x 60 inches)

PLATE 10



Solace

Roofing felt #30, black and white latex paint, joint compound

(82½ x 70 inches)

PLATE 11



Promised Land

Roofing felt #30, black and white latex paint, joint compound

(76 x 70 inches)

PLATE 12



The Old World

Roofing felt #30, black and white latex paint, joint compound

(104 x 60 inches)

PLATE 13



Constellations

Roofing felt #30, black and white latex paint, joint compound

(76½ X 70 inches)

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VITA

Aaron Joseph McElfish, born in 1982, he was raised in various places all over the world. He spent a majority of his childhood in Mississippi where he finished High School and went on to East Central Community College where he pursued an associate's degree in Art, as well as his certificate in welding and cutting processes. He went on to Mississippi State University where he earned his Bachelor of Fine Arts. He has worked as a freelance artist, photographer and videographer concentrating on the documentation of pop culture in the South, as well as production design concepts for short films and animated shorts until returning to school in 2011 to pursue his M.F.A. at The University of Mississippi. Currently the future is unwritten.